DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 474 683 RC 023 903

AUTHOR	Henderson, Robyn
TITLE	Disrupting Homogeneity: When Being Different Is Breaking School Rules.
REPORT NO	HEN-02209
PUB DATE	2002-12-00
NOTE	14p.; Paper presented at the Annual Conference of the Australian Association for Research in Education (Brisbane, Queensland, Australia, December 1-5, 2002).
AVAILABLE FROM	For full text: http://www.aare.edu.au/02pap/hen02209.htm.
PUB TYPE	Reports - Research (143) -- Speeches/Meeting Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE	EDRS Price MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	Behavior Problems; Case Studies; Context Effect; *Discipline Policy; Diversity (Student); Elementary Education; Foreign Countries; *Migrant Children; *School Culture; *Stereotypes; *Student Behavior; *Teacher Attitudes; Teacher Expectations of Students; Teacher Student Relationship
IDENTIFIERS	Australia; Behavior Management

ABSTRACT

A case study was conducted of Ryan, an 11-year-old student from New Zealand whose family came to Australia as itinerant fruit pickers. Classroom observations; document reviews; and interviews with Ryan, his teachers, and the school principal indicated that Ryan was a badly behaved student. However, in focusing on Ryan's behaviors and linking poor school behaviors with a lack of interest in learning, teachers were surprised when Ryan scored highly on statewide literacy tests. Despite learning being the core educational business, the school's discipline policies appeared to override other policies promoting social justice and respect for student diversity. By excluding Ryan from his cohort through suspensions, detentions, and relocation into an older class, school personnel attempted to coerce Ryan into changing his behaviors. Yet, these practices limited Ryan's access to classroom learning opportunities. Approaches such as this, that identify the student as deficient, ensure that other factors--the school's approach to discipline, the school culture, or even classroom organizational matters--remain unexamined. Understanding the way that contextual factors can constrain available discourses and taking a broader view that includes institutional, social, and cultural contexts might assist school personnel to make sense of students' behavior and to begin the difficult job of catering for student diversity. (TD)

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ED 474 683

HEN 02209

DISRUPTING HOMOGENEITY:
When being different is breaking school rules.

Robyn Henderson
James Cook University
Robyn.Henderson@jcu.edu.au

Part of Symposium 9 – HEN 02206 –
Mediating access to language and literacy learning:
New classrooms, old assumptions

Paper presented at the AARE Annual Conference:
Brisbane, 1-5 December, 2002.

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School documents, such as a school prospectus or an annual report, often say that a school is proud of the diversity displayed by students and of the social justice or equity policies that underpin the school's day-to-day operations. However, despite the rhetoric acknowledging and promoting diversity, it appears that it is can be quite difficult for schools to cater for diversity within the complexities of day-to-day institutional operations. Indeed, some school policies seem intent on moulding students, however diverse they might be, into a homogenous group.

To illustrate the apparent difficulties and the paradoxical situation that can exist between policy and practice, this paper is a case study of Ryan (a pseudonym), an eleven year old student from New Zealand whose parents came to Australia to work as itinerant fruit pickers. The family arrived in May 2000 with a three-year plan – to work the winter harvesting seasons in the north and the summer harvesting seasons in the south, and to return to New Zealand with a more financially secure future.

This paper focuses on the winter seasons of 2000 and 2001, when Ryan was enrolled at the school in northern Australia. Whilst the majority of itinerant students who arrived at the school seemed to merge into the student population with apparent ease, this was not the case for Ryan. He did not settle into the routines and expectations of the school and, as a result of teachers' attempts to settle him down and to persuade him to follow school rules, he spent a considerable amount of time on detentions and suspensions, at the principal's office and isolated from his peers. Teachers, however, struggled to make sense of Ryan's behaviours and to know how to cope with what they perceived as the wilfulness and defiance of an extremely badly-behaved student.

The study

The case study of Ryan is part of a larger study that is examining teachers' discursive constructions of itinerant farm workers' children as literacy learners. Teachers' constructions of Ryan, the only Anglo ethnic student (see Singh, 2000) involved in the study, seemed to be constituted by their readings of him as a boy, as a student, particularly as a badly-behaved student, and as the child of itinerant workers. Teachers shifted in and out of a range of discourses. At times, they drew on developmental discourses that positioned Ryan as an immature student who might "settle down" as he grew older. At other times, his behaviours were linked to his itinerant lifestyle, suggesting that he might "settle in" better to the school when he became "more used to the cycle" of moving. However, in focusing on Ryan's behaviours and linking poor school behaviours with a lack of interest in learning, teachers were surprised when Ryan scored highly on state-wide literacy tests.

The complexity of Ryan's case, therefore, seemed particularly interesting and worthy of further investigation. It raised a number of questions about the assumptions teachers make about the intersections between students' behaviours and achievement levels. It also highlighted the way that some school policies are enacted – in this case the behaviour management policy – whilst other school documents, such as those that discussed the school's values and beliefs, seemed to be moved into the background.

In presenting this case study, the paper begins by briefly describing how data was collected and analysed. It describes the school context into which Ryan moved and the way that the school's behaviour management policy seemed to take priority over issues relevant to Ryan's learning. It then provides a brief outline of critical events during Ryan's enrolments and discusses teachers' readings of Ryan as a badly-behaved student and as a literacy learner. The paper concludes by considering the relationship between Ryan the problem student and Ryan the literacy learner, and the difficulties experienced by the school in catering for Ryan's differences from other students.

Collecting and analysing data

Data was gathered through semi-structured interviews with Ryan, his teachers and the school principal, as well as naturalistic classroom observations and the collection of school documents, report cards and student work samples. The data provided a narrative and critical incident record during his enrolments at the northern Australian school.

The study is framed by poststructuralist theories that open up the possibilities for multiple meanings. In seeing "the possibility of reading the complexity of the multiply positioned and constructed human subject" (Alloway & Gilbert, 1997, p.53), the case study presented here offers a range of teachers' readings and presents, in turn, my reading – as researcher – of those readings. Researchers do not always read research sites in the same way (Reid, Kamler, Simpson, & Maclean, 1996) and the reading presented here is, therefore, but one of many possible readings.

In analysing the case study data, I used critical discourse analysis to consider alternative ways of reading the taken-for-granted school practices that impacted on Ryan, the case study student. I examined text and its relationship to context (Fairclough, 2001), using some analysis of the linguistic features of texts along with considerations about the ways teachers' readings are enabled or constrained by context. Text was understood in broad terms and included written text, spoken text and the body, as teachers' readings of Ryan's body appeared significant.

The school context

For as long as school personnel could remember, the northern Australian school, at which Ryan enrolled, had experienced annual enrolment fluctuations in line with the local harvesting season. Enrolments during the summer months averaged at approximately 530 students, but during the winter, with the arrival of itinerant farm workers' children, enrolments averaged at approximately 580. Each winter, as itinerant children enrolled at the school, teachers saw their jobs as becoming increasingly difficult: class sizes increased and sometimes exceeded the maximum sizes specified by government regulations (Queensland Industrial Relations Commission, 2000); teachers' workloads expanded, and the schools' small playground seemed more crowded than it did before the arrival of the itinerant children.

The already diverse student population became even more diverse, especially ethnically. By the middle of the harvesting season, up to 10 per cent of the student population identified as coming from language backgrounds other than English and included

Tongan, Samoan, Maori, Turkish and Vietnamese students. School documents, such as the *School prospectus* and the *School annual report*, recognised this diverse student population, with the *School annual report 2000* stating that

> A considerable percentage of the school population, approximately 12%, belongs to the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture. There is also an influx of ESL [English as a second language] students in the picking season.

Similarly, the *School prospectus* focused on student diversity explaining that the school values and believes "that children are individuals with special needs, learning at different rates and in different ways" and "that the background from which children come should be sensitively considered."

In dealing with the annual seasonal arrival of farm workers' children, the school's principal described the situation as "a logistical nightmare," which usually required the employment of an additional teacher and the subsequent reorganisation of students into classes. For many teachers, the harvesting season was associated with the stresses of trying to cope with increasing class sizes and the arrival of new students. Yet, at the same time, teachers were also trying to manage their daily teaching duties, organise and oversee teacher aides, and implement intervention programs, as well as performing a plethora of other duties, including playground duty, organising sporting teams, attending meetings, talking to parents, and being conversant with a large number of systemic and school policies.

Several teachers commented that the arrival of additional children in the school changed the context within which they worked and that these changes not only impacted on teachers' workloads, but also seemed to affect school dynamics. In particular, teachers indicated that behaviour problems increased. For example, teachers explained that

> I think the behaviour problems escalated in the playground because of the increased pressure of numbers . . . I noticed the extra twenty or thirty kids, going into what we already know is a small play area, added to the behaviour problems.

> As the principal said to the P. and C. [Parents' and Citizens' Association] the other night, he said behaviour in the school has gone from first term, one kid maybe in the withdrawal room, now there are eight to ten a day.

When students' behaviours were identified as inappropriate and the school's behaviour management policy was invoked, exclusions – from the class, the playground, specific events or the school – were the specified consequences for bad behaviour.

As part of a state education system, the school also operated within a wider educational context, which provided overarching policy and strategic directions, including the *Principles of inclusive curriculum* and the *Management of behaviour in a supportive school environment* (Education Queensland, 1998a, 1998b). Whilst the use of exclusions in the school policy seemed to contradict the call of state policies for inclusive practices

and the maximisation of student engagement with the curriculum, state policy recognised "the most stringent step of exclusion" as "only considered when all other approaches have been exhausted or rejected" (Education Queensland, 1998b, p.6).

A case study – Ryan

Standing out as a badly-behaved student: Critical incidents

At first glance, Ryan could have passed for any Anglo-ethnic student (Singh, 2000) in the school. However, his New Zealand accent and some vocabulary variations indicated that he was linguistically different from most of the students. Ryan himself recognised these differences and explained in an interview that "New Zealand and Australian language isn't very different" but that "My dad still speaks New Zealand. He's refusing to change to Australian."

Although it might have been thought that Ryan's differences from other students – as a New Zealander in an Australian school – and his different educational background might have required special consideration, there was little evidence to suggest that this was the case. However, it was Ryan's classroom behaviour and teachers' perceptions that he was a manipulative, naughty and defiant student that marked him as different from other students. Indeed, Ryan seemed to alienate some teachers rapidly and in an extreme way. As a result, he stood out – not only amongst the itinerant farm workers' children, but also amongst most of the children in the school – as a problem student (Davies & Hunt, 1994) who had failed to take up the normalised behavioural practices of the "good" student.

Although Ryan's teacher in 2000 described his behaviour as challenging, the principal explained that

> I've had dealings with him mainly through his behaviour. His behaviour hasn't been good. It hasn't been vicious bad. It's just misbehaviour. It's inappropriate behaviour. It hasn't been anything with a suspension or anything. It's just minor.

In the following year, however, Ryan's behaviour was considered anything but minor. On his third day in the school, he was withdrawn from class for a day, for supposedly bullying another student. His teacher expected further trouble:

> I would say the next few days, next week, he'll do something. He'll defy me in the class. That's where he's at now. . . he's not prepared to follow instructions so next week he'll probably defy me.

The teacher documented Ryan's behaviour, describing him as a "sullen, rude and uncooperative" student. Less than two weeks later, Ryan was suspended for five days. Whilst the suspension report stated that the grounds for suspension had been "misconduct, disobedience, and conduct prejudicial to the good order and management of school," the catalyst had been his swearing at the teacher.

On his return to school, Ryan spent thirteen weeks in a class of students who were two years older than he was. This transition period was to have been a temporary measure, during which Ryan was expected to participate in problem-solving activities that would prepare him for his return to his year level cohort. According to both the teacher and Ryan, however, his time in the older class was productive and enjoyable and provided few opportunities for the teacher to work with him on problem-solving strategies.

When Ryan eventually returned full-time to his own class, he was again suspended – after only two days. Following this suspension, the principal decided that a transition period was not appropriate because "he enjoyed it so much." As a result, Ryan returned immediately to his own class, remaining there until his family departed for the south at the end of the season.

Standing out as a badly-behaved student: Teachers' readings

In interviews, Ryan's teachers talked extensively about Ryan's behaviours, drawing on their readings of his bodily and verbal performances – especially what he looked like, where he was, what he was doing and who he was with. This was evident in teacher interviews. For example,

> Challenging would be possibly the word to describe when it came to his behaviour and so on. . . He had his couple of mates and tended to go with the tough guys. So fitting in with the tough guy image in the tough guy crowd.

Dominant readings of Ryan positioned him as a student who had taken up masculine discourses that involved macho behaviour and violence, not unlike the behaviours of Gilbert and Gilbert's (1998) "bad boys."

The way that the teachers read Ryan's body was also evident in the documentation that was prepared for the principal and deputy principal and described Ryan's inappropriate behaviours. As shown in the following extract from an *Individual student behaviour sheet*, the teacher described Ryan's physical appearance and actions, as well as verbal performances, as evidence of his disruptive behaviours.

25.05.01: 1.50 pm. Repeating what the teacher has just said. Warned twice – he continued – asked to go to [another teacher's class] to work and refused to go. Frog marched to [the other class].

28.05.01: Refused to sit on parade – squatted instead – On being asked to sit properly replied "No."
1.50 pm. Repeatedly disrupting class – sent to [name of another class]. Answered with "No." Marched to [the other class].

30.05.00: 10.00 am. Repeated rudeness and disruptions during the day. When asked why he was out of his seat he asked me "Why are you out the front?"

> 2.30pm. Ryan tripped [student's name] during T-ball. He was asked to sit out and replied "No." I escorted Ryan to a seat on the edge of the oval and during this time Ryan called me a "F**king wanker."

Bodily actions such as frog marching, squatting, and tripping, along with a range of verbal actions, such as repeating the teacher's words and saying "no," were recorded as evidence of Ryan's disobedience, defiance, and perhaps even mockery, of the teacher. In keeping with the purpose of an *Individual student behaviour sheet* – seemingly to provide unequivocal evidence of a student's "bad" behaviours – this record of Ryan's actions was written in declarative mood, often omitting the subject (Ryan or he) of the sentence. These shorthand notes highlighted Ryan's misdoings by presenting his actions – such as "Frog marched," "squatted," and "Marched" – in Theme positions, at the beginning of sentences, and without modals. As in much of the teacher talk, Ryan was constructed as a deliberately naughty student who refused to accept school rules and expectations.

Whilst the construction of Ryan as a "tough guy" seemed to be a dominant narrative at the school, not all teachers constructed him in that way. The teacher of the older class, for example, seemed to construct him as a student who was trying to balance the conflicting identities of being a "good" student with the physicality of being what she described as a "real boy." Her description of Ryan suggested that

> He'd like to be seen as a good kid, but he's also rough and tumble and he's also very sporty and he also likes to have a biff and a bash in the playground a bit, because he's a boy. He's a real boy.

However, regardless of the perceived underlying causes of Ryan's behaviours – whether he was seen as a student who would always challenge teachers and push boundaries, or whether he was behaving in a way that some teachers saw as natural for male students – the problem was always located in Ryan. Possible solutions to Ryan's challenging behaviours, therefore, were always conceptualised in terms of finding strategies to change Ryan. The teachers and the school administration used behaviourist means that were legitimised by the school's behaviour management strategy. Ryan's removal from his peers and from the school, through suspensions and his relocation to the older class, were strategies of persuasion, even coercion, aimed at encouraging Ryan to change his behaviours and to conform to school expectations.

Not standing out as a literacy learner

Whilst Ryan's behaviours were foregrounded in teachers' discussions, little was said about his development as a literacy learner. The focus on behaviour management strategies, and the subsequent failure of these to normalise Ryan's behaviour, seemed to preoccupy teachers, even to the extent of planning how the school was going to manage Ryan when he returned in the 2002 harvesting season.

In reading Ryan's body and constituting him as a tough guy, the teachers did not expect that he would be a successful literacy learner. As one teacher explained,

> He didn't give the appearances of being a great lover of reading . . . Looking at classroom demeanour, you'd tend to probably rate him down a little.

It seemed that this view, accompanied by what one of the teachers described as "standard expectations that itinerant kids are going to be below the peer group," would have made underachievement both natural and expected for Ryan. Indeed, Ryan's report cards gave little detail about his literacy learning, apart from ticks in boxes that identified that he was either "*working satisfactorily*" or had achieved a "*sound*" level of achievement. Teachers' comments on his report cards drew attention to Ryan's problematic behaviours, rather than to aspects of learning, with teachers representing Ryan through managerial discourses. These comments suggested behavioural and attitudinal changes that the teachers thought were desirable. For example Ryan should "maintain a more orderly management of his impulses and energies," "channel his energy into productive directions" or develop "the right attitude."

Reassessing the literacy learner

It came as a surprise to teachers, therefore, that Ryan scored highly on national and state-wide literacy tests. In 2000, Ryan's result on the Australian Schools English Competition (see The University of New South Wales, 2000) placed him at the 93rd percentile for the Year 4 students from his school who entered the competition. In 2001, his result on the writing component of the Year 5 Test (see Queensland School Curriculum Council, 2001) was the top result for the student cohort at the school and placed him amongst the highest achievers in the top 25 per cent of students for the state.

As such information became available, school personnel re-evaluated their understandings of Ryan. After the arrival of the Australian Schools English Competition results, Ryan's teacher concluded that "he definitely has a fair amount of ability." To explain the discrepancy between his assessments of Ryan and the results on the external test, however, he drew on some of the negative attributes that he had described in relation to Ryan's behaviour and linked them to his performance as a student. He explained that "maybe he's an avid closet reader," because

> I have the feeling that we've got maybe a few kids who decide to hide their abilities a little bit, particularly if they get the impression that by hiding the ability they'll get work that's slightly easier.

The teacher's reading of Ryan, as a student who deliberately misled and deceived teachers about his abilities, reinforced the view that Ryan was able to control and manipulate his behaviours at will.

Similarly, following the arrival of the results of the Year 5 Test, the school principal reassessed his understandings about Ryan. His reappraisal identified Ryan as intelligent, clever and bright:

> Ryan is a very intelligent boy who will say exactly what you want him to say and he can manipulate very very well . . . He was that clever . . . As I say, a very bright boy, really incredibly bright.

The principal's description of Ryan used the adverbs "very," "that," "really" and "incredibly" for emphasis. However, although intelligence is normally regarded as a positive attribute for students, the principal constructed Ryan as a student who was misusing his intelligence to counter school rules. In the principal's reading, Ryan was exercising his intelligence to manipulate people and events. For example, he argued that "he stirred up people just to get a reaction" and "will say exactly what you want him to say," as a way of demonstrating his contempt of school rules. According to the principal, he was "really just defiant of the rule, defiant of the authority."

However, despite the reassessments that took place, little was said about Ryan's abilities as a student. The discussion of school personnel seemed to always come back to what they saw as Ryan's problematic behaviours. Ryan's "cleverness" helped to reword their constructions of Ryan as a badly-behaved student, but seemed to have little effect on their constructions of him as a literacy learner.

Although Ryan's final report card for 2001 reported an "*advanced*" result in the composing aspect of writing, and thus acknowledged his success on the Year 5 test, there was no other indication for Ryan's parents that any of his schooling experiences had been successful. Meanwhile, however, the principal was discussing plans for 2002, in preparation for Ryan's return to the school. He suggested that Ryan was a gifted and talented student:

> Hopefully he'll be referred through to the special needs committee and at present we're looking at an identification process with [name supplied – a district consultant] and looking at ways of helping teachers identify, not labelling, but identify kids who have gifted and talented, are gifted and talented and organising the sort of things that they can do.

It seemed, therefore, that the failure of school behaviour management processes to normalise Ryan's behaviours had resulted in a view that Ryan was not normal. In effect, Ryan was to be noted as different, despite the principal's assertion that the process would be "looking at ways of helping teachers identify, not labelling." As with the other interpretations of Ryan's behaviours, the problem was located in Ryan.

Discussion

Ryan was an ongoing puzzle for school personal. In finding Ryan's behaviour difficult to manage, teachers struggled to find ways of persuading him to conform to school rules. Ryan had failed to take up the behaviours of the well-behaved student which, according to Kamler, Maclean, Reid and Simpson (1994), is about "becoming more like everyone else" and "minimising difference" (p.4). It was Ryan's successes in external literacy

tests, however, that made teachers question their assumptions about Ryan, especially about his capabilities as a student.

Despite learning being core educational business, sections of the school's code of behaviour – "We should . . . Treat all members of the school community with respect" – appeared to over-ride other sections, such as "We should . . . Promote the rights of all student to learn." By excluding Ryan from his Year 5 cohort – through suspensions, lunchtime detentions, and relocation into an older class – school personnel attempted to coerce Ryan into changing his behaviours. Whilst such approaches appeared to limit and constrain Ryan's access to classroom learning opportunities, these approaches were understandable within the context of the day-to-day operations of those particular classrooms. For teachers trying to juggle the needs of all students – in a school context where class sizes were increasing, where space between students' desks was reducing as more desks were brought into the classrooms, where some students had background knowledge of lessons from the previous day, week or month and others did not – a behaviour management strategy that offered clear guidelines seemed essential.

However, approaches such as these, that focus on the individual behaviours of one student, ensure that other factors, like the approach to discipline that has been adopted, the school culture or even classroom organisational matters, remain unproblematised (Meyenn & Parker, 2001). In fact, the continued focus on Ryan as a behaviour problem may have prevented teachers from noticing that most of his "problems" were interactional in nature. Although all of the incidents that had been documented in his file originated in relational difficulties, mostly between Ryan and the teacher, but at times between Ryan and other students, the school's behaviour management strategy resulted in his segregation from his peers. This practice of excluding problematic students from their class or from the school not only discounts the social and cultural contexts within which misbehaviours occur, but it prevents access to learning about other ways of interacting and behaving. Thus no space was provided for Ryan or for others to engage in discussions about his misbehaviours or their relationships to the social practices of the school community.

Attempts to coerce Ryan into changing his behaviours appeared to be based on an assumption that he knew how to behave appropriately and had chosen deliberately to do otherwise. And teachers found evidence that supported that supposition. However, as Davies and Laws (2000) explained, "the available repertoires for being a 'good school student' differ between classrooms and from one situation to another within classrooms" (p.152). Indeed, an explanation that positioned Ryan as a mobile student – who had only recently arrived in Australia and whose school year was divided between schools in different Australian states with different education systems – did not seem to be available to school personnel.

In their attempts to understand what they saw as Ryan's failure to control his behaviours, school personnel tended to draw on a limited range of discourses, particularly ones that offered pathological accounts of Ryan and his family. These accounts, in conjunction with "'good school behaviour' discourse" (Davies & Law, 2000, p.149), made

exclusionary strategies appear quite appropriate. However, such a focus tends to ignore the contextual effects that might have been involved. A wider view, that takes contextual factors and other possible discourses into consideration (Davies & Laws, 2000; Henderson, 2001; Hill, Comber, Louden, Rivilland, & Reid, 1998) is likely to open up a broader range of possible explanations, including the possibility that Ryan's movement between schools may have played a part in his "bad behaviours" or even that school practices may have been involved.

Although the principal considered other factors, such as inappropriate curriculum or teacher inexperience as being implicated in Ryan's difficulties to fit in, he kept returning to the institutional discourses that focused on Ryan's personal characteristics. However, finding a strategy that worked for Ryan proved to be a difficult task. The principal acknowledged that "We try, but we don't always get it right."

Throughout data collection, it seemed that school personnel had worked very hard to identify the reasons for Ryan's behaviours and to find strategies that would be best for everyone – teachers, Ryan and other students. Although efforts to explain Ryan's behaviours were ongoing, what seems problematic is that teachers' slippage into binaries and stereotypical accounts loses sight of the heterogeneity of the student population. It seems that those who do not fit the school's normative values can easily be identified as deficient and talked about in deficit terms, as was the case with Ryan.

It also seemed that the school's focus on Ryan's "bad" behaviours and the attempts to change them deflected attention away from learning issues that are supposedly the core business of schools. Yet, as further information about Ryan became available, normative expectations that well-behaved students achieve well, and badly-behaved students do not, were not borne out. Ryan's success in literacy tests, which were organised outside of the school setting and hence carried "apparent impartiality" (Davies & Law, 2000, p.175), not only resulted in school personnel looking for other discourses, but indicated the need to take a broader view of Ryan within the school context. To borrow the visibility-invisibility metaphor that has been used by others (e.g. Kamler, Maclean, Reid, & Simpson, 1994; Malin, 1990), Ryan's literacy competence seemed to be masked or made invisible by his bad classroom behaviour. Indeed, teachers' readings of Ryan's body had focused on behaviours that were not usually associated with "good" students and they had not expected him to be a successful literacy learner.

What this study has shown, therefore, is that catering for diversity is a complex undertaking and that the application of a "one size fits all" approach is probably unlikely to be successful (Minami & Ovando, 1995). Whilst it is recognised that broad generalisations cannot be drawn from a single case, this study of Ryan demonstrates some of the intricacies that were involved in the relationship between behaviour management and literacy learning and highlights some of the frustrations for school personnel in trying to make sense of the situation. Understanding the way that contextual factors can constrain the discourses that are available and taking a broader view, including the institutional, social and cultural contexts, might assist school personnel in

their attempts to make sense of students' behaviour and to begin the difficult job of catering for student diversity.

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